

Chapter 11: Signs for Those of Understanding

Each step in the raging blizzard brought the demon in the mirror closer to the end. The knee-deep snow soaked through its winter boots, socks, and multiple layers of pants. The upper body remained insulated under two coats, but icy daggers sliced the exposed skin around the demon's eyes.

At a specific section of the highway, the demon in the mirror parked the rental car off the side of the road and headed east. It did not want to cause too much of an inconvenience to anybody. To make sure of that, it threw its phone and car keys onto the highway. The snow would probably bury them, and if not, a passing car would certainly shatter them.

The plan was to trek across the dense, untouched thicket until it met a cliff facing a lake. Reaching it would provide an unobstructed view once the blizzard cleared. The demon wanted to view at least one true majesty of this world before it met its end.

But the demon in the mirror did not reach the cliff. It got lost in the forest, disoriented by the white haze created by the blizzard. After trudging through snow and tree roots until sunset, the demon wondered if it parked the car at the wrong spot. The demon could not get The GPS to work in these conditions, so it doubted its spatial judgement.

But when the demon doubled back, it realized that half its tracks were already covered, and when it doubled back on its doubling back, the same was true for those tracks. As the battering snow worsened, it found itself venturing deeper and deeper into the forest for

protection. Eventually, the daggers cutting its eyes ceased, but by then, it was surrounded by dark brown bark and snow. The cliff might as well be on the moon.

The demon's attempts to find a clearing also failed, the black and white canopy of branches extending endlessly upwards and outwards. It began to realize that its fate lay in a sarcophagus of roots and ice as the last vestiges of the setting sun turned the entire world black, impossible to navigate.

As the demon in the mirror rounded a tree, the shadows of the *shayāṭīn* slithered out from gaps in the bark.

“Finish the mission.”

It trudged onwards.

“Destroy the parasite.”

One foot after the other.

“Remove any doubt.”

It slipped and twisted an ankle, but the demon in the mirror trudged onwards, one foot after the other.

“Your fate is sealed.”

Left foot.

“Join us.”

Right foot.

“Among the worms.”

They continued the chant, but the demon in the mirror trudged onwards, one foot after the other.

One of them rose above the rest, the towering spectre of overbearing might.

“Why do you delay?” He asked. “You have failed once already. Every second you delay is another second you curse this world with your existence, another second you fail your mission because of your *nafs*.”

“I need to see the northern lights,” the demon in the mirror said.

“Who cares about your needs?” He reproached. “You are a stupid, worthless, idiot child who should have never been born.”

The demon in the mirror did not answer. It kept going, one foot after the other.

“You are less than nothing,” He hissed. “Everything you touch is corrupted by your pathetic, worthless spirit. You were meant to die like a rat in a gutter, so inconsequential that you never existed at all.”

The rest of the *shayāṭīn* echoed His last words, repeating it endlessly.

The demon in the mirror tripped on a tree root. Beneath the snow was a partially frozen puddle, which soaked through the outer layer of mittens and coats. The demon in the mirror rolled away, but the frost rapidly froze its arms. It shivered uncontrollably as all sensation in its body disappeared.

The demon slumped against a tree, too tired to think or feel. From the pockets of the outermost parka, it shakily grasped the handle.

But it just could not do it. Even though it knew that its performance of British masculine content with Islamic forms sent it down the wrong path. Even though it knew the maiden died a year ago. Even though it knew that it owned nothing except some clothes, some food, and a rental car. Even though it knew that it never planned to live beyond its thirties. Even though it knew that it was going to die from frostbite in this canopy of black and white before finding the rental car. Even though it knew that it would never find the keys or phone again. In that domain,

there was nothing to doubt. Despite everything commanding it to do the rational choice, it just could not do it. The amygdala, cingulate cortex, and cerebellum were still stronger than the prefrontal cortex.

Instead, the demon in the mirror curled into a ball, trying its best to maintain its body heat. It closed its eyes, hoping to go to a better place. A place where the frozen roots turned into woodchips baking in the sun. A place where the black and white branches turned into a brilliant multi-coloured plastic playground. A place where the snowflakes turned into rays of sunlight and the cold became childish laughter.

We ran laps around a playground under a sapphire sky. He was different from other parents, carrying a boundless energy that made the other children laugh. The scent of cigarettes on His leather coat did not matter. I do not remember what His face looked like, but those details did not matter. The only thing that mattered was the feeling. He had a face that matched the feeling of coming home to a fireplace after playing in the snow.

I wasn't friends with the other children, but that didn't matter. He was my first, last and only friend. I didn't need anyone else because He would always be there for me.

My stubby hands and feet tried to climb a miniature rock wall, but the excessive layers protecting me from the autumn winds made it impossible to grab on.

He lifted me up as if I was a feather and placed me on the playground. I ran across it while He followed behind. With tiny fingers, I grabbed a hold of chains from which a tire hung. The tire shook when I stepped on it, and I feared that I would slip and fall.

He was just beneath, encouraging me. Yet I was frozen in place, so He wrapped his hands around me, carrying me across. He told me I did such a good job, and even though I knew it was

a lie, I kept going, pushing it to the back of my mind.

He stretched out His arms at the bottom of a yellow slide. I slid down, waving my hands as if I was on a rollercoaster, and I was enveloped in the embrace of His leather coat. The scent of the cigarettes filled my nose, calming me the same way one would be calmed by the warmth of a fireplace.

As we walked home, wherever it was, we caught sight of someone's parents giving out apple slices to the rest of the kids. He said that I should go ask for one, but I couldn't. When we visited His friends and relatives, I knew I didn't belong with their children. Something just didn't click together, like puzzle pieces from different sets. I didn't understand their language either, so I just sat next to Him while He talked to their parents, getting so used to being lonely that it became my default. People were unpredictable, and so could not be trusted. He took me to the apple slices, but my mouth remained shut as I hid behind His legs, reverted to my most basic functions. He sighed and said something to get the apple slice for me. I took the slice in my stubby hands, tasting its sweetness, but while I ate, I noticed a look on His face that made me sad.

"I love you," He said, planting a kiss on my forehead. I heard that in certain cultures, especially East Asian cultures, it is difficult for parents to tell their kids outright that they love them, often relying on acts of service and sacrifice to express love. He had no such issues, liberally and openly making it known what He felt about me, for good and for ill.

Even though I knew it was a lie, I leaned into Him, allowing the scent of the fireplace to fill my nose as He gently caressed my hair. My eyelids grew heavy, but the sadness did not go away.

“So why did you do this?” a voice from above lamented.

The demon in the mirror looked up and saw a half-rotted skull. A white beard was turned into tattered ropes, and the skin around the cheeks and lips swelled black. A mass of putrefaction spilled from its decaying mouth.

Worse were the eyes. One was a nesting ground, the other was glazed over like a dead fish, staring at something far, far away, but without the ability to focus on it.

The corpse seized the demon in the mirror with cold, iron hands, sharp fingers digging into the demon.

“My own father made me sit still as he swung a rod down on my hands,” it lamented. “He swung hard enough to tear the skin. When I first held you, I promised to never touch you in anger. Whatever you did, so long as it was *halāl*, I would be happy.”

The corpse stretched out a hand to the demon in the mirror. Several knives and nails jutted out, and a flame sprouted forth, burning away the flesh until the corpse’s hand was reduced to bone and molten metal.

“Look at what you did to me. Now I burn forever because of you.”

It gouged deep, tearing and searing away.

“I thought my son would not hide anything from me. I thought we were closer than anyone else on this earth. I thought I raised a good Muslim who would prove to me that everything I endured, everything I suffered, everything I sacrificed, would be worth it.”

The nails and blades shred the demon in the mirror. It sent the demon reeling as material was torn away. The searing flames cauterized these wounds shut while bursting raw nerves. The demon bore the pain in silence, so the corpse wrapped its skeletal hands around the demon’s throat. The crushing force around its windpipe diminished its breath to short gulps, before its

throat was crushed too small even for that.

The demon could not bear it anymore, striking the corpse. It fell to the ground, its skull cracking open like an egg and a mass scurried out. The demon in the mirror ran away from the corpse as the rest of it burned.

It ran and ran and ran across hills and valleys and roads and mountains and cliffs. But the air grew so cold as the world was blanketed in ice and snow. The snow quickly covered its feet and ankles, forcing it to leap over the snow mounds. The hail of ice turned its skin clammy and its clothes heavy with frozen water. Its breath laboured to keep its muscles moving while breathing in the icy daggers. An eternity went by before its run was reduced to a jog, which was then reduced to a walk, which was then reduced to a shuffle, and then a crawl. Slowly but surely the demon's mind and body froze, its sweat turning to ice.

The demon looked back, and saw His crawling, burning corpse just behind. It was all for nothing.

The demon in the mirror crawled back to the corpse. It was the only source of warmth in this world. It hugged the demon, and even though the nails and knives and bones tore away at the demon, even though the flames burned the demon to a char, even though the demon knew it ruined His life, the demon got used to it. Skeletal hands wrapped around its neck, slowly crushing the windpipe, and this time it did not resist.

It looked up, and spanning the entirety of the empty sky was a black void around which an endless horizon of eyes upon eyes cast judgement on those below. As the eyes circled the abyss, the light warped and bent and disappeared in a violent mockery of the natural order. No human was meant to witness this. This must have been the true form of the *malā'ika*, an overwhelming devourer of worlds sent to enact the will of that unending and unfeeling

sovereign. Emanating from the void was the sound of a trumpet, so deafening that it shattered rock and snow and metal and bone and everything that lived, before drawing it all upwards towards annihilation. A machine of calculated extermination embodying that cosmic entity of perfect order. The celestial machine shattered the demon and the corpse like minced meat. Even more terrifying, the celestial machine shattered the links that bound family together, as if all those decades of sacrifice were nothing more than a rusted chain.¹

“*Yā Allāh!* Why did it have to be me?” He lamented with despair.

“*Yā Allāh!* Why did it have to be me?” He lamented with anger.

“*Yā Allāh!* Why was I cursed with a parasitic, worthless, subhuman abomination?”

The demon in the mirror awoke in a cold sweat as its head split apart, violently shaking the layers of snow accumulating on top of it. The blizzard stopped, but the night sky was still obscured by clouds and trees, so dark the demon could not make out anything beyond the arm in front of it.

“This must be a nightmare,” it groaned. “This must be a nightmare. I am going to wake up.”

But it did not.

The forest was a pitch-black abyss, dark enough so that the snow was as black as ink, indistinguishable from everything else.

“Why did you make me like this?” the demon in the mirror yelled into the abyss. “What was the point of this?”

The skin of its dry, freezing lips cracked open from the yelling, and so too did the freezing skin around its lips. But the demon in the mirror received no response.

It ran through the abyss, tripping over ice and roots.

“Answer me! Was my life a joke? A game? A fairytale? Did any of it matter?”

The *shayāṭīn* laughed and cursed wherever it turned. Their shadows were inseparable from the endless abyss, enveloping all that exists.

“Go ahead!” the demon in the mirror yelled. “Laugh. Laugh at the foolish failure who was cursed by love. Laugh at the pathetic failure who thought they did not deserve to be happy. Laugh at the worthless failure who thought they had to suffer to make those who loved them happy.”

The laughter grew deafening, grinding the demon’s mind to dust.

“Worthless.”

“All you have sacrificed has amounted to nothing more than failure.”

“Subhuman.”

“Your sins are set in stone.”

“Abomination.”

“The greatest of losers. In this world and the next.”

“Worthless.”

“You should have never had a family.”

“Subhuman.”

“It is in your very nature to kill everything you touch.”

“Abomination.”

“You are a worthless failure who came from a worthless people.”

“Worthless.”

“A man who does not deserve a better life.”

“Subhuman.”

“You are less than nothing,”

“Abomination.”

“So inconsequential that you never existed at all.”

There was no escaping the nightmare. It was all that ever was and ever will be, until the end of time.

The demon in the mirror tore off all its upper layers and threw them across the snow.

From the parka, it grabbed the handle.

Shaky hands held the knife in the air as the demon screamed at the top of my lungs.

“Did I die already? Did you judge me already and send me to this stage of hell as punishment? Did you decide that *Jahannam* was where I became my own torturer? Did you decide that *Jahannam* was where I could see people happy without the ability to be happy myself?”²

The abyss continued to laugh.

Was God laughing at the demon’s suffering in this stage of *Jahannam*? Was it the *malā’ika*? The *jinn*? The *shayātīn*? Those who acquired divine citizenship?

Everything that exists in this world and the next laughed, including the demon in the mirror, who joined the *shayātīn* as they beckoned it towards the next stage of *Jahannam*.

The demon rested on a snow-covered log, the knife dropping from its hands, as clean as the day it was bought. It gazed up at the canopy of black and white branches, all of it appearing black as night by now, and cursed itself for its weak will.

The demon genuinely believed it was in hell. That was the only thing that could explain

the events leading it here. Hells of scalding water and blazing flames that char the skin probably exist³ (for many peoples in this world, their experience is not far off from that). But only in the true *Jahannam* would its prisoners also believe that they deserve it. Without that, they may convince themselves that hell is just a test of faith. For example, a Muslim who found themselves under the judgement of *Yāma* (the god of death in Indian religions) in *Naraka* (the hell realm in Indian religions) might convince themselves that they are being tested by God.⁴ The test will determine if the Muslim remains steadfast in the afterlife or if their faith is dependant on empirical beliefs. The Muslim will then claim to be a martyr of God, and God will (presumably) save them from this test and allow them to enter *Jannāt*.⁵ A non-Muslim enduring *Jahannam* may make similar arguments by applying gnostic cosmology separating the True God from powerful malevolent demons with provisional control over aspects of life and death like the demiurge.⁶

Most Muslim would probably reject such unorthodox beliefs, proclaiming that tests are only a feature of mortal life and that the hereafter only contains straightforward rewards and punishments. They do not realize that tests are one of the most potent forms of punishment. They may also proclaim that since this belief is not mentioned in the *Qur’ān*, it is unlikely to exist. They do not realize that if such tests were confirmed, their purposes would be nullified.⁷ Others may reject the relevance of non-Islamic cosmologies, but there are various avenues to reasonably integrate these cosmologies.⁸

Regardless, the true *Jahannam* must have been designed in a way that prevents such ways of thinking from arising in the heads of its prisoners. Thus, the true *Jahannam* (at least its initial stages) must force the prisoner to create their own hell. Humans have already figured this out to some extent. The 1983 CIA *Human Resources Exploitation Training Manual* (a

euphemism for interrogation and torture) does not advocate for going directly to physical torture.⁹ It prefers techniques that employ human psychology (i.e.: using placebos to convince someone they have been given a truth serum to remove blame for cooperation,¹⁰ bombarding the subject with confusing questions that push them to reveal more information than initially intended).¹¹ It may also prefer techniques that saps the subject's strength (i.e.: having to maintain one bodily position for a long time),¹² leaves them permanently anxious/uncomfortable (i.e.: disrupting clocks, meals, schedules and depriving them of natural light to disorient their sense of time passing so there is no regular pattern),¹³ and isolates them (i.e.: solitary confinement).¹⁴

That was the only way the demon could have killed the only people who ever loved it. This world must be the first stage of hell. It was given a choice designed to make it manufacture its own hell. It could betray its parents, contradict its orthodox religion, and endure the violence and persecution experienced by Rosario, Habib, and the other queer people it read about. Or it could suppress the *nafs* for His sake and the sake of what it considered religious integrity, convinced that this was the only way to protect itself from this world and the next. The choice was obvious. The threat of coercion destroys resistance more effectively than coercion itself.¹⁵ Only now that it is too late did the poison plaguing its choice unveil itself, shattering its mind so much that it would seek out the pus and scalding water awaiting in the next stage of hell. This is what the demon believed from its amygdala to its prefrontal cortex to its cerebellum to its brain stem.

And yet the demon still could not do it, even while shivering in this abyss, the pins and needles in its extremities giving way to numbness. Every inhale of the frigid air sent tiny little knives cutting the insides of its throat and nose. It tried alternating between deep and shallow breaths, but that was just the worst of both worlds.

The demon's migraine took on a thumping sensation timed to its heartbeat. It groaned as its vision blurred, its consciousness drifting far away.

But at the very edge of its vision, I saw it.

A gap in the canopy of black and white, barely larger than a fist. Beyond that gap, the clouds were drifting, and a star could be seen, along with wisps of green which illuminated the abyss.

I inched like a worm for a better look.

The wisps turned into green and blue bands, which turned red, then purple. A gust of wind passed over, breaking some of the branches above, and despite my blurry vision, I saw her.

She was there. Among the stars. Among the green and blue and red and purple. She shuffled, swayed, and spun like a ballet dancer. Fluid welled up in my eyes.

The bands of colours spread out across the sky, turning pink, yellow, and orange. I did not know that the northern lights could create such colours.

These bands of colours coalesced, and she was joined by her beloved lady. They were like twins, leaping and swinging and twisting in perfect symmetry, ending in an embrace. More bands coalesced, and she was hugged by her mother and father, who loved her no matter what.

I blinked, and for the first time in known memory, the fluid did not disappear. The tear flowed down dry cheeks. Then another tear flowed, and another, until a stream of warm salt water dripped onto ice.

She danced with overflowing spirit, and they joined her, along with many more maidens like her. They were then joined by gentlemen and gentlepersons who shared in her struggles and triumphs.

Our eyes darted across the canopy of black and white. Most of the sky was covered in

darkness, but in several places, wisps of green and blue and red and purple and pink and yellow and orange pushed through, from which danced more maidens. Muslim maidens. Jewish maidens. Christian maidens. Canadian maidens. Congolese maidens. Honduran maidens. Guatemalan maidens. Arab maidens. Palestinian maidens. Ukrainian maidens. Uyghur maidens. Rohingya maidens. Tigrayan maidens. Sudanese maidens. Yemeni maidens. Bengali maidens. *Jummā* maidens. Hawaiian maidens. Crimean Tatar maidens. *Seneca* maidens. *Wendat* maidens. Maidens of the *Mississaugas of the Credit*. And many more. They were dancing, leaping across the sky, unbound by borders, all to ensure nobody danced alone.

With the tears came sniffles, and we groaned from the migraine. We took deep, slow breathes, knowing that we were just on the cusp of shattering the dam preventing decades of emotions from flooding out.

From one gap in the canopy of black and white, we noticed the edge of the crescent moon. He was always fascinated by the moon, wishing He could figure out how Muslim astronomers understood the patterns in the moon and stars to predict the passing of months in the Islamic lunar calendar and precisely determine the direction of the *qibla*. He habitually recited verse 190 of *Sūra Āl 'Imrān* (The Family of Imran) whenever we saw the moon on our walks back home from the '*Ishā'* *salāh*.¹⁶ He also played the recitation of various esteemed *Qāri'* (a person who recites the *Qur'ān* with the proper rules of recitation) just before going to bed. All those *Qāri'* were men, yet this did not prevent me from listening to millions of voices from millions of faces with a million colours and genders and nations and creeds, their melodious chorus flowing far above the canopy of black and white:

“*Inna fī khalqi l-samāwāti wal-ardī* (Indeed, in the creation of the heavens/sky and the earth) *wa-kh'tilāfi l-layli wal-nahāri* (and the alternation of the night and day) *laāyātin li-*

ulī l-albāb (are signs for those of understanding).¹⁷

Verses 190 to 200 of *Sūra Āl ‘Imrān* are often recited as a prayer to *Allāh*. They contain supplications asking forgiveness for one’s sins, entrance into Paradise, and protection from the Hellfire awaiting the wrongdoers. Even though these verses were embedded into our prefrontal cortex, they never entered our hearts. The hellfire always reminded us that God was psychologically incomprehensible. Nonetheless, millions of voices flowed from ear to ear:

Alladhīna yadhkurūna l-laha (Those who remember *Allāh*) *qiyāman waqu ‘ūdan wa ‘alā junūbihim* (standing and sitting and on their sides) *wayatafakkarūna fī khalqi l-samāwāti wal-ard* (and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth), *rabbanā mā khalaqta hādhā bātīlan* ([saying,] Our Lord, You have not created all this without purpose).
Sub’hānaka (Glory be to You) *faqinā* (so save us) *‘adhāba l-nār* (from the punishment of the Fire).¹⁸

The sights and sounds shattered everything within us, including everything that was already shattered. In all the years of studying *fiqh* and *hādīth* and politics and history and trying to hold ourselves accountable to a strict moral code, not once did we receive a real *āyah* (sign, miracle). Our faith never left the prefrontal cortex. For thirty years we told ourselves that we sacrificed too much to let go of His God. For thirty years we told ourselves that His God did not want us to flourish in this world or the next. For thirty years we told ourselves to worship Him and His notion of God even though we knew that it was warped by the conquerors of the world. These rationalizations for nihilism were swept away like dust as our entire being took in the *ikh’tilāf* (alteration) of the *layl* (night) in the *samāwāt* (heavens/sky):

Rabbanā innaka man tud’khili l-nāra (Our Lord, indeed whom You admit to the Fire)
faqad akhzaytah (You have disgraced him), *wamā lilz̄ālimīna min anṣār* (and never will

the wrongdoers find any helpers).¹⁹ *Rabbanā innanā sami 'nā* (Our Lord, indeed we heard) *munādiyan yunādī lil'īmāni* (a caller calling to the faith) *an āminū birabbikum faāmannaā* ("Believe in your Lord," and we have believed). *Rabbanā fa-gh'fir lanā dhunūbanā* (Our Lord! Forgive us our sins) *wakaffir 'annā sayyiātinā* (and remove from us our evil deeds), *watawaffanā ma 'a l-abrār* (and cause us to die with the righteous).²⁰

We cried for our mama. We cried for our baba. We cried for an end to the nightmare and an end to our part in it. We cried for an end to the cycles of *waswas* destroying our souls. We cried for a life worth living. We cried and cried and cried and cried as the majesty of God's creation carved a path of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple through the abyss:

Rabbanā waātinā mā wa 'adttanā 'alā rusulika (Our Lord, grant us what You promised us through Your Messengers) *walā tukh'zinā yawma l-qiyāma* (and do not disgrace us on the Day of the Resurrection), *innaka lā tukh'lifū l-mī 'ād* (indeed, You do not break Your Promise).²¹

We crawled to the clothes in the snow while crying like a newborn child. We wrung out as much water as we could with our frostbitten hands before putting them on. We crawled, then trudged, pushing through the pain. We noticed the glint of the knife. It was still shrouded in darkness, just beyond the path carved out by the northern lights. A shadowy figure arose from the knife, beckoning us towards it. Yet we did not go astray. It was drowned out by millions of voices from millions of faces reminding us to live:

Fa-s'tajāba lahūm rabbuhum (Then responded their Lord), *Annī lā uđī 'u* (Never will I allow to be lost) *'amala 'āmilin minkum* (the work of any of you) *min dhakarin aw unthā* (whether male or female). *Ba 'đukum min ba 'đ* (You are one of another), *fa-lladhīna hājarū wa-ukh'rījū min diyārihim* (so those who emigrated and were driven out from their

homes), *waūdhū fī sabīlī waqātalū waqutilū* (and were harmed in My Cause and who fought and were killed), *la-ukaffiranna 'anhūm sayyiātihim* (surely, I will remove from them their evil deeds), *wala-ud'khilannahum* (and surely I will admit them) *jannātīn tajrī min tahtihā l-anhār* (to Gardens under which rivers flow), *thawāban min 'indi l-lah* (a reward from *Allāh*), *wal-lahu* (and *Allāh*), *'indahu ḥus'nu l-thawāb* (with Him is the best reward).²²

We followed the path, wherever it took us. If it led us to the end, so be it. If it led us out of the abyss, so be it:

Lā yaghurrannaka (Do not be deceived) *taqallubu lladhīna kafarū fī l-bilād* (by the affluence of those who disbelieved in the land).²³ *Matā 'un qalīlun* (It is but a small enjoyment); *thumma mawāhūm jahannam* (then their final refuge is Hell), *wabi'sa l-mihād* (and wretched is that place for rest).²⁴ *Lākini lladhīna ttaqaw rabbahum* (But those who are mindful of their Lord), *lahum jannātūn tajrī min tahtihā l-anhāru* (will have gardens beneath which rivers flow), *khālidīna fīhā* (abiding eternally therein), *nuzulan min 'indi l-lah* (as accommodation from *Allāh*). *Wamā 'inda l-lahi khayrun lil'abrār* (And that which is with *Allāh* is best for the righteous).²⁵

Millions of voices with a million colours and genders reminded us that there is no wait for admission into God's promised land. Millions of voices from a million nations and creeds reminded us that we were never cast out of God's promised land.²⁶

Wa-inna min ahli l-kitābi (And indeed, among the People of the Scripture) *laman yu'minu bil-lahi* (are those who believe in God) *wamā unzila ilaykum wamā unzila ilayhim* (in what has been sent down to you and in what was sent down to them), *khāshi 'īna lillah* (humbling themselves before God). *Lā yashtarūna biāyāti l-lahi thamanan qalīla* (They

do not sell God's revelation for a small price). *Ulāika lahum ajruhum 'inda rabbihim* (These people will have their rewards with their Lord). *Inna l-laha sarī'u l-hisāb* (Indeed, *Allāh* is swift in taking the account).²⁷

Millions of voices from millions of faces with a million colours and genders and nations and creeds reminded us that we must only look beyond the canopy of black and white.

Yāayuhā lladhīna āmanū (O you who believe), *ṣ'birū* (Be steadfast) *waṣābirū* (and be patient) *warābiṭū* (and be constant) *wa-ttaqū l-laha* (and be mindful of *Allāh*) *la 'allakum tuf'lihūn* (so that you may be successful).²⁸

Ch 11 Notes

¹ Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan, trans. *The Noble Qur'ān: English Translations of the meanings and commentary* (Madinah: King Fahd Glorious Qur'ān Printing Complex, 2015), 70:10–14.

² Note that primarily psychological forms of torment are not mentioned in the *Qur'ān* and are not typical to orthodox Muslim beliefs. Usually, the psychological torment one might experience in *Jahannam* is the knowledge that one will reside in there forever because one has gone on the wrong path in life, and that one's sins might have ended up sending loved ones into *Jahannam* as well. The rest of the torment is physical and inflicted on the sinner involuntarily. Think of it as the ultimate concentration camp or gulag. The torment of those in *Jahannam* usually does not include the creation of worlds where the sinner's failures eventually alienate them from love and hope. One could look to unorthodox and philosophical perspectives for more psychological speculation on hell, most famously Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*. I do not know of any depictions of hell where these worlds are crafted to trick one into thinking that they are still in the temporal world before the hereafter. I am not sure if this belief relates to belief in reincarnation.

As for the belief that hell proceeds in stages, this seems to be compatible with orthodox Islamic beliefs insofar as one is willing to accept historical speculation on the stages of hell, usually those drawing from biblical narratives. As far as I'm aware, these stages were never conceptualized as places sinners go to one after the other.

³ Al-Hilali and Khan, *Qur'ān*, 4:56, 7:40–41, 14:16–17, 18:29, 19:56, 22:19–22, 25:11–14, 32:20, 39:16, 39:71–72, 40:71–72, 44:43–50, 47:15, 56:41–56, 77:29–31, 78:21–30, 88:2–7, 104:4–9.

⁴ Note that in the *Qur'ān*, it is stated that the torturers in *Jahannam* are angels. Thus, a Muslim who found themselves in *Naraka* must be in a subunit of *Jahannam*, and the *Yāma* they face must either be one of the *jinn* or *shayāṭīn* (for whom the angels have staved off torment), or an angel in the form of *Yāma*, testing Muslims in a similar way as the angels Harut and Marut: Al-Hilali and Khan, *Qur'ān*, 2:102, 40:49–50, 66:6, 74:30–31.

⁵ Here is a brief elaboration on the specifics of such a test if it does exist:

- It is reasonable to believe that a sinful Muslim might be sent to *Jahannam* to atone for their sins.
- However, this punishment can also double as a test to see if this Muslim will abandon their faith when subjected to *Jahannam*.
- A Muslim who knew they were in *Jahannam* might cling to the fact that the punishment for a believer is always temporary.
- But if their memories after death were slightly altered and if their experience of hell was crafted to resemble *Naraka*, then this Muslim can be deceived into thinking their faith was false and their punishment eternal.
- Thus, the test for such a Muslim is to see if they will renounce Islam and worship *Yāma* or remain a Muslim, even when their senses and experiences tell them that they are in *Naraka* and that faith in Islam is futile.
- If the Muslim abandons his faith, *Yāma* continues his punishment, but if he denies *Yāma* and affirms his belief in Islam, then God may show mercy on that believer and remove them from *Jahannam*.
- Their punishment in *Jahannam* thus lasts for as long as it takes them to convince themselves to stand by Islam even when everything they are told tells them otherwise.

⁶ Note that gnostic interpretations are very unorthodox. Nonetheless, it should be reasonable from a Muslim perspective that if a non-Muslim entered *Jahannam*, they would cling to whatever beliefs allowed them to make sense of their suffering, which would include gnostic ones.

⁷ Note that while this speculation has no basis in Islamic texts, I think it is still interesting because of how it explains aspects of *Jahannam* that Muslims may not fully understand (because they were never intended to fully understand):

- It explains why Muslims must existentially fear entering *Jahannam*, even if it is for a second. *Jahannam* introduces tests of faith worse than those seen in this world, which carries existential risks for the believer.
- It explains why the punishments in *Jahannam* can seem a bit disproportionate. The punishments depend on how that person's faith reacts to punishment, which can lead a person to suffer more than they need to.
- It explains why the punishments in *Jahannam* purify a person's soul. The test reflects their faith, so the punishments can compel a person to (after a lot of suffering) purify their own souls and pass the test.

⁸ The easiest cosmology to accept is that the *jinn* and *shayāṭīn* take on forms that drive other cultures towards *shirk*, so the deities of other cultures will be sent to *Jahannam* along with the rest of the wrongdoers. A difficult cosmology to accept is that God created the cosmologies of other cultures as a test for Muslims to see if they would remain a Muslim when exposed to empirical proofs from other religions. The most difficult cosmology to accept is that the deities and cosmologies of other cultures coexist with Islamic cosmology. Their religious leaders may be

considered prophets, their gods may be considered misinterpretations of angels, and their cosmologies may reflect corrupted interpretations of Islamic equivalents or regional subunits within Islamic equivalents.

For example, the Christian concept of *Purgatory* is not mentioned in the *Qur'ān* but may have some vague resemblance to *al-a'rāf* (the heights) in Islamic theology. A Muslim may believe *Purgatory* is a corrupted description of *al-a'rāf* or that it is a subunit within *al-a'rāf* that was mentioned in the Bible but not the *Qur'ān* since that cosmology was needed to promote faith in the Christian peoples but was irrelevant for promoting faith in the Arabs: Al-Hilali and Khan, *Qur'ān*, 7:46–47.

⁹ Note that the reasons the CIA does not prefer physical torture is because of how it may produce false confessions, sap morale among those committing torture, and inevitably really mess up innocent people when they are caught up accidentally, which will often be a political shot in the foot. Also note that while the manual makes it clear that it does not advocate torture, this is done via annotations on the original document. For example, section D on page A-2 notes that it will be discussing coercive and non-coercive techniques. The annotations state that “While we deplore the use of coercive techniques, we do want to make you aware of them so that you may avoid them.” This is written over a crossed out original stating that “While we do not stress the use of coercive techniques, we do want to make you aware of them and the proper way to use them.” It is always quite reasonable to doubt the CIA’s ability to hold itself to any principle, but this slight acknowledgement of paper-thin morality is also funny: Central Intelligence Agency, *Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual* (1983), p. A-1–A-3, K-1, K-10, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/00107398/>.

¹⁰ Note that the annotated CIA document categorizes this as one of the coercive techniques, which are deemed illegal and tortuous, so it is unclear if the annotated CIA includes such placebos under torture or not: CIA, *Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual*, p. K-1, K-12–K14.

¹¹ CIA, *Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual*, p. J-13–J-14.

¹² Note that the annotated CIA document advises against prolonging these techniques enough to turn the discomfort into physical pain/damage, as that would be torture. Regardless, it considers these techniques better at destroying a person’s will than subjecting them to physical torture: CIA, *Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual*, p. K-1, K-9–K-10.

¹³ Note that the annotated CIA document advises against prolonging these techniques enough to become a form of psychological torture, and that the defensive apathy that such techniques may induce in a subject makes it easy to end up prolonging such techniques: CIA, *Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual*, p. K-2, K-5, K-14.

¹⁴ Note that the annotated CIA document advises against solitary confinement since it is a form of psychological torture due to the lack of stimuli producing delusions and hallucinations: CIA, *Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual*, p. K-6–K-7.

¹⁵ CIA, *Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual*, p. K-8.

¹⁶ Note that there is a *hadīth* describing *The Prophet* doing something similar late at night: *Abū al-Husayn 'Asākir ad-Dīn Muslim ibn al-Hajjāj ibn Muslim*, “(15) Chapter: Siwak (tooth-stick),” In *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Book 2, *Hadīth* 63, accessed September 18, 2024, <https://sunnah.com/muslim/2/63>.

¹⁷ Note that this interpretation requires the prioritization of some translations in the interpretation of *li-ulī* (For men/for those): Al-Hilali and Khan, *Qur'ān*, 3:190.; “Verse (3:189) - Word by Word,” *Quranic Arabic Corpus Word by Word Grammar, Syntax and Morphology of the Holy Quran*, accessed September 18, 2024, <https://corpus.quran.com/wordbyword.jsp?chapter=3&verse=190.>; “*Sūra Ali ‘Imran* 3:190,” *Quran.com*, accessed September 18, 2024, <https://quran.com/3/190?translations=131%2C85%2C84%2C95%2C19%2C22%2C20%2C203%2C57.>

¹⁸ Note that this interpretation combines different translations together. This should not be a big issue as they say the same thing, just in different ways that make one more eloquent than the other at different points: Al-Hilali and Khan, *Qur'ān*, 3:191.; “Verse (3:191) - Word by Word,” *Quranic Arabic Corpus*.

¹⁹ Note that this interpretation requires the prioritization of some translations in the interpretation of *zālimūn* (wrongdoers/polytheists): Al-Hilali and Khan, *Qur'ān*, 3:192.; “Verse (3:191) - Word by Word,” *Quranic Arabic Corpus*; “*Sūra Ali ‘Imran* 3:192,” *Quran.com*.

²⁰ Note that this interpretation combines different translations together. This should not be a big issue as they say the same thing, just in different ways that make one more eloquent than the other at different points: Al-Hilali and Khan, *Qur'ān*, 3:193.; “Verse (3:193) - Word by Word,” *Quranic Arabic Corpus*.

²¹ Note that this interpretation combines different translations together. This should not be a big issue as they say the same thing, just in different ways that make one more eloquent than the other at different points: Al-Hilali and Khan, *Qur'ān*, 3:194.; “Verse (3:193) - Word by Word,” *Quranic Arabic Corpus*.

²² Note that this interpretation combines different translations together. This should not be a big issue as they say the same thing, just in different ways that make one more eloquent than the other at different points: Al-Hilali and Khan,

Qur’ān, 3:195.; “Verse (3:195) - Word by Word,” *Quranic Arabic Corpus*.

²³ Note that this interpretation requires the prioritization of some translations in the interpretation of *taqallubu* (movement/prosperity/lucrative trading/vicissitude/free disposal and affluence). These different translations seem to exist because it is unclear if “movement” is used literally in the context of the verse or metaphorically to refer to economic success: Al-Hilali and Khan, *Qur’ān*, 3:196.; “Verse (3:195) - Word by Word,” *Quranic Arabic Corpus*; “*Sūra Ali ‘Imran* 3:196,” *Quran.com*.

²⁴ Note that this interpretation combines different translations together. This should not be a big issue as they say the same thing, just in different ways that make one more eloquent than the other at different points: Al-Hilali and Khan, *Qur’ān*, 3:197.; “Verse (3:196) - Word by Word,” *Quranic Arabic Corpus*; “*Sūra Ali ‘Imran* 3:196,” *Quran.com*.

²⁵ Note that this interpretation requires the prioritization of some translations in the interpretation of *ttaqaw rabbahum* (are mindful of their Lord/fear their Lord). More translations emphasize fear, but others emphasize mindfulness, so I have prioritized those translations: Al-Hilali and Khan, *Qur’ān*, 3:198.; “Verse (3:198) - Word by Word,” *Quranic Arabic Corpus*; “*Sūra Ali ‘Imran* 3:198,” *Quran.com*.

²⁶ Note that this is a reference to a *Sūfi* poem from *Rābi’ā Al-Basri*. In it, a man pleads with God to open a door for him. She exclaims that the door was never closed in the first place. See: Omid Safi, *Radical Love: Teachings from the Islamic Mystical Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), p. 62, <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300235562>.

²⁷ Note that this interpretation combines different translations together in the interpretation of *Allāh*. Most translations simply leave it unchanged, but others have used the term God since it is dealing with the believers of other faiths, for whom the word God is considered more general/secular. I have combined the translations according to what I believe reflected the worldview being addressed: Al-Hilali and Khan, *Qur’ān*, 3:199.; “Verse (3:199) - Word by Word,” *Quranic Arabic Corpus*; “*Sūra Ali ‘Imran* 3:199,” *Quran.com*.

²⁸ Note that this interpretation does not use the Al-Hilali and Khan translation. It has an extremely weird translation of *waṣābirū* (and be patient) and *warābiṭū* (and be constant). Al-Hilali and Khan translates *waṣābirū* as “and be more patient (than your enemy)” and *warābiṭū* as “and guard your territory by stationing army units permanently at the places from where the enemy can attack you.” They seem to prioritize a sectarian and possibly jihadist projection of these verses far beyond any natural interpretation.

This interpretation also requires the prioritization of some translations in the interpretation of *wa-ttaqū l-laha* (and be mindful of *Allāh*/and fear *Allāh*). If Al-Hilali and Khan can make really strangest translations of *waṣābirū* and *warābiṭū*, I can choose the slightly less psychologically distressing translation: Al-Hilali and Khan, *Qur’ān*, 3:200.; “Verse (3:199) - Word by Word,” *Quranic Arabic Corpus*; “*Sūra Ali ‘Imran* 3:200,” *Quran.com*.

Ch 11 Bibliography

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